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Ahwatukee hopes of freeway on tribal land rise, fall with every change in wind

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It seems as though Ahwatukee Foothills residents are hanging on every word from the Gila River Indian Community these days. Every word, that is, on the topic of the proposed South Mountain Freeway. And the media are dutifully reporting each and every change in the wind.

We learn that Gila Gov. William Rhodes wants a public vote on allowing a feasibility study for a freeway route across the reservation. We sense hope in the village!

We hear that the tribal Legislative Standing Committee turns down Rhodes' idea. Bummer! But all is not lost, because Rhodes still wants a vote.

Alas, the three-member Government and Management Standing Committee turns it down, making all dreams of a freeway on tribal land - thus saving the tranquility of Ahwatukee - seem lost.

But wait! Now Rhodes is pushing a petition drive, hoping to get 10 percent of Gila River Indian voters to agree to put the idea on a ballot.

Ahwatukee residents must be getting tired of holding their breath over this teeter-tottering.

On the reservation, it's hard to know what Rhodes' motives are. If the new Gila governor is betting his political future on promoting a freeway, he may have a short tenure. Consider the history of recent years: The Gila River Indian Community Council adopted a resolution in 2001 that prevents even the study of a freeway on tribal land. About a year ago, the council reaffirmed that position.

So is Rhodes toying with the Ahwatukee folks, or is he serious about thinking the freeway would be a good development for his community? Admittedly, a freeway offers a strip of commercial area to develop. But the Gila River Reservation could go years developing along Interstate 10 and its borderlands with Chandler, Coolidge, Ahwatukee and Maricopa before running out of potential commercial space.

The tribe could find benefits in either option, freeway or no freeway.

Meanwhile, the Arizona Department of Transportation is plodding along in its environmental impact study. Director Victor Mendez wants a decision on a West Valley connection point to I-10 in June. By fall 2007, a decision on the eastern freeway alignment should be final.

In terms of government planning, 16 months is a short time.

But it's a good long while to hold one's breath.

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